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ABSTRACT

Age differences affect children's understanding and evaluation of television content, and these differences may be related to social behavior after watching television. One type of age-related changes concerns changes in the cognitive skills that children must use to comprehend content. Studies have shown that children as old as third graders remember little of a plot, that children's knowledge of the motives and consequences for aggression increase with age, as do their abilities to reconstruct sequences and identify causal relationships. These qualitative changes reflect cognitive growth involving learning of task-relevant cues, aspects of memory, improvement of selective attention and inferential abilities. A second type of age-related changes concerns changes in the bases that children use for evaluating social acts in general. Studies have shown that children of different ages are likely to use different criteria for evaluating a televised model's actions; there is a major shift at about age nine or ten from consequences-based to motive-based evaluations of actions. These age differences should be a major concern in future work on the television viewing-social behavior relationship. For very young children, representations of aggressive acts they have seen on television often stand along as guides for later behavior, while older viewers are much more likely to have a representation of the action modified by knowledge of the motives and consequences associated with it. Studies of the idea of a cognitive mediator, a conceptualization of the mechanism for the effect of a single television program, are underway. Apparently the temporal contiguity of motives, aggression, and consequences facilitates comprehension for younger children. (KM)

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DEVELOPMENTAL ASPECTS OF UNDERSTANDING AND EVALUATING TELEVISION CONTENT

Symposium on Television and Young Children's Behavior
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I want to talk today about the age variable in studies of television effects on social behavior and why it's so essential to consider age for our understanding of what children take away from their television viewing experiences.

By and large, the work from the Surgeon General's report pursued the general question of a causal relationship between television violence and children's behavior in a rather undifferentiated way. Except for the work of Leifer and Roberts (1972) the question was asked about the child audience; and the research was typically done with samples of preschoolers, or school-aged children, or adolescents; but rarely in terms of viewers across a range of ages. And so, despite all we have learned from the Surgeon General's program--and some of the work has contributed notably to the field--we have not learned much about the role of age changes in children's responses to television content.

What I would like to do today is review briefly what we do know, from the Surgeon General's program and other sources, about what children of different ages get from television programming. And I'd also like to suggest how these differences in understanding and evaluating the content of programs may be related to social behavior after watching television.

It seems to me that two major aspects of age-related changes in children's conceptions of television content have emerged:

(1) One has to do with changes in the cognitive skills that children must use to comprehend content. By this, I mean their skills in handling the information in dramatic presentations, including perhaps their abilities to make appropriate inferences about the inter-relationships of scenes within plots that are sometimes subtle and complex.

Several years ago, we did some studies at Stanford that dealt with some of the cognitive abilities I am talking about. For example, in one study we found that children as old as third graders remember only a small proportion of the information that adults consider essential to retelling the plot of a TV program. But as they grow older, there seems to be a progressive increase in their ability both to know what is important in the plot and to be able to focus on that important information while ignoring non-essential content (Collins, 1970). This selective ability is clearly crucial in achieving a mature conception of television content, but our results indicate that it comes only gradually and that third graders may very well take away a different message--or at least a less complete one--than ninth graders do.

For example, Leifer and Roberts (1972), in their research for the Surgeon General's program, found that children's knowledge of the motives and consequences for aggression clearly increased with age. Kindergarteners answered questions about motives and consequences at about chance level, but accurate knowledge increased in a rather linear fashion up to high-school age.

Other studies, by our group and others, showed similar age changes in doing such cognitive tasks as correctly reconstructing the sequence of scenes (Leifer et al., 1971) and specifying the causal relationships between scenes in a plot (Flapan, 1968).

Some work that Tom Berndt, Valerie Hess and I (Collins, Berndt and Hess, in preparation) have been doing recently at Minnesota analyzes age-related changes in children's conceptions of a TV program somewhat more closely than other studies have. We showed an edited version of an aggressive television program to kindergarten, second, fifth, and eighth graders and to adults; and then we interviewed them all to get at their memory for the plot and their understanding of the motives of the main characters and the consequences of their actions.

The aspect we were most interested in was what we called comprehension; that is, the extent to which aggression was construed in terms of its relevant context--the aggressor's motives for committing the aggression and the consequences to him. As you can see from Figure 1, kindergarteners typically recalled only the aggressive action; quite often, their entire retelling of the plot consisted of "Some people got killed" or "Well, there was lots of shooting and this boy got killed". But the older subjects associated, first, consequences, then motives, and finally, the full complex of motives and consequences with retelling the aggressive action. So these older viewers, but not the younger ones, understood that A had killed B for a certain reason and, as a result, had been arrested and tried.

These results show obviously patterned age changes in what children understand from this particular television content. It seems clear that

these qualitative changes reflect cognitive growth involving things like learning of task-relevant cues, aspects of memory, improvement in selective-attention and inferential abilities and so forth--all age-related skills for understanding and evaluating program content.

(2) The second aspect of age-related changes in conceptions of content has to do with what appear to be changes in the bases that children use for evaluating social acts in general. The data I've just described showed an improvement with age in the knowledge of motives associated with aggression, and also an age-related progression from construing the act in terms of consequences to comprehending it in terms of motives or both motives and consequences. In addition, we found that kindergarteners and second graders were significantly less likely than older children and adults to explain their evaluations of the aggressor in terms of his motives. Instead, they relied on simply recounting his action as a reason for their evaluations, or they mentioned the consequences he received; e.g., "He was bad because he shot people" or "He was bad because he went to jail".

These findings fit very well with the results of a number of other studies in the literature--both normative, content-analysis studies like ours (e.g., Flapan, 1968; Leifer et al., 1971) and experiments in the paradigm developed by Piaget for his work on moral judgment (e.g., Armsby, 1971; Gutkin, 1972; Hebble, 1971; and King, 1971). What all of them imply is that children of different ages are likely to use different criteria for evaluating a televised model's actions. The research fairly consistently shows a major shift at about age nine or ten from consequences-based to

motive-based evaluations of actions. This kind of age change would be especially significant in the very plausible case where motives and consequences are incongruent--one positive, the other negative--and in cases where consequences are subtle and inexplicit. Under such conditions, it would not be surprising to find children younger than fourth grade or so evaluating the social behaviors of television actors quite differently than older viewers do.

It seems to me that these age differences in understanding and evaluating the actions of social models from television should be a major consideration in our future work on the television viewing-social behavior relationship. We have indications from laboratory work on observational learning (e.g., Bandura, 1965a; Berkowitz & Rawlings, 1963) that contextual cues like motives and consequences for aggression tend to modify an observer's subsequent performance. But we have shown here today that viewers of different ages may or may not understand these cues, or may understand them in varying ways. The question is, what do these variations with age imply for behavioral effects of television?

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I think it is fruitful to conceptualize the mechanism for the effect of a single television program as a cognitive mediator--a cognitive state that is formed during observation, much in the way that Bandura (1965b) proposed for the formation of a verbal or imaginal cognitive mediator during observational learning from less complex presentations. My version of the mediator includes a representation of the modeled social behavior and the observer's inferences and evaluations about the action and the motives and consequences associated with it. Although factors other than

the program may also determine effects, of course, this kind of working model suggests that differences in the effects of a presentation per se on post-observation behaviors are a function of differences in the content of the cognitive mediator.

At least one dimension of those differences is the very age-related aspects of understanding and evaluating television content that I have been discussing here. It is not unreasonable to expect that, for very young children, representations of aggressive acts they have seen on television often stand alone as guides for later behavior; while older viewers are much more likely to have a representation of the action modified by knowledge of the complex of motives and consequences associated with it. It follows that their subsequent social behaviors could be quite different as well. At Minnesota we are presently engaged in a series of laboratory and field studies to test the general idea of the kind of cognitive mediator I have proposed here and the prediction of age differences in the effects of complex social models associated with it.

I recently reported some evidence (Collins, 1973) that indicate that this sort of mediating effect on behavior may occur. I found that third graders who saw negative motive and negative consequences scenes separated from aggression by commercials were subsequently more aggressive than their age mates who saw the negative modifying scenes in temporal contiguity with the aggression. These differences did not hold for the sixth and tenth graders in the study, however. Apparently, for the first group of third graders, the separating commercials interfered with comprehension of aggression in terms of negative motives and consequences, while temporal

contiguity of the three scenes made the comprehension task easier for the other group of third graders. Older subjects could handle the cognitive difficulties imposed by separation, so that the cognitive mediators they formed under separation were essentially the same as those formed under temporal contiguity. In other words, these data clearly suggest the relevance of the age dimension to behavioral differences and support the usefulness of the cognitive-mediator concept in explaining variations in the effects of television exposure.

Finally, it seems to me that we now have ample indications in the literature that--with respect to age, among other things--an undifferentiated approach to the problem of television effects on children is no longer a very practically or scientifically useful one. The time has come to include the age variable in our studies so as to move toward more specified knowledge of effects and--as a happy by-product--so as to make the study of television and children one that adds not only to our information about television effects, but also to our knowledge of children and how they develop.

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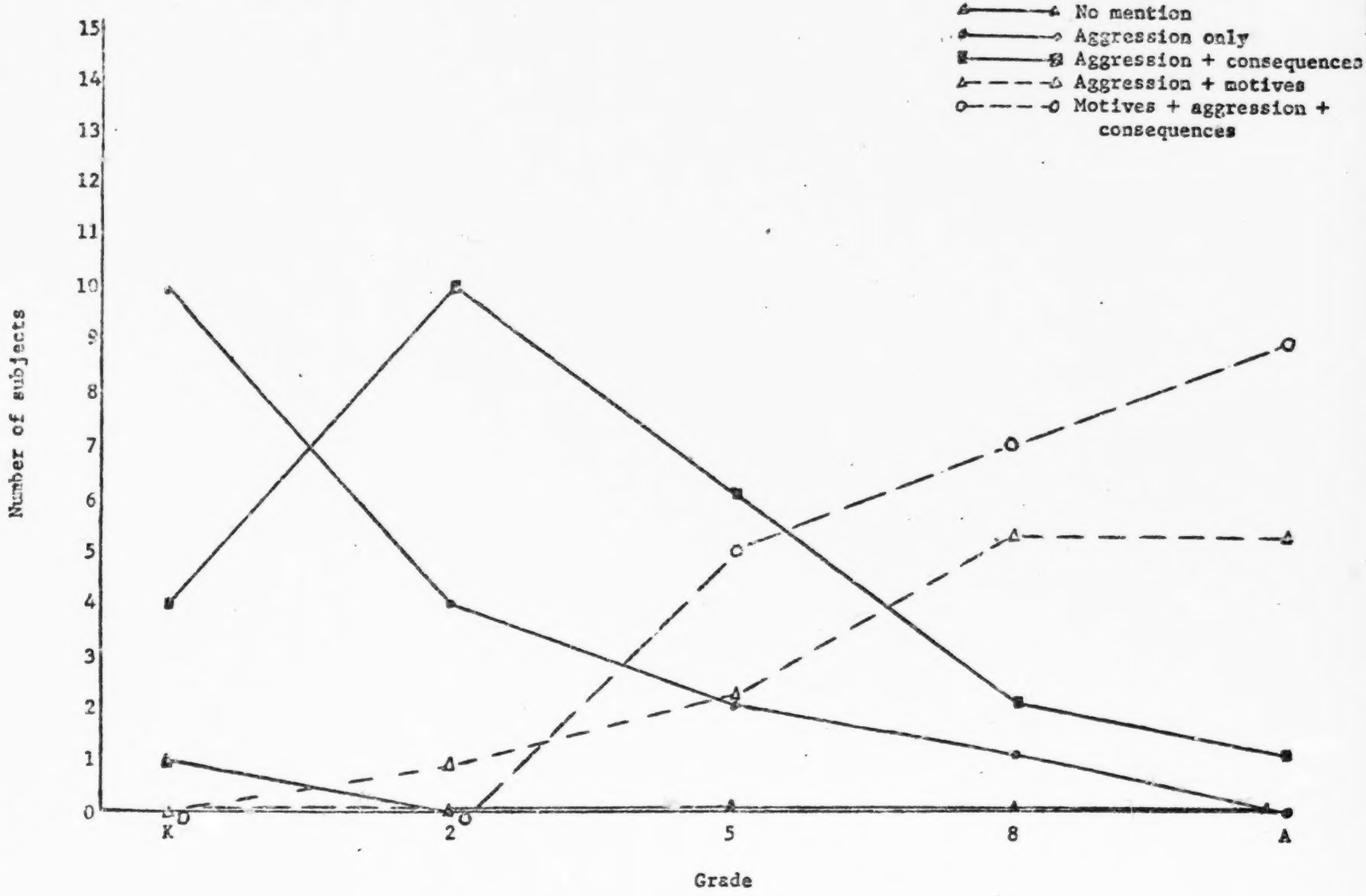

Changes with age in comprehension of motives--aggression--consequences complex